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Helping

Amanda Rea

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Helping

Alberta is not my sister. Everyone seems to know this but her. She's Hispanic and I'm not. She is thin and her nose is like a hook, whereas my features are all rounded. We have never even been mistaken for sisters. It's like this: Alberta is my mother's first husband's ex-wife's stepdaughter. She claims it's the same thing as sisters but I doubt it. I don't remember her stepfather and she never met my mother, and for me, knowing the same parents is a requirement. But here we are. She is grafted onto me where a sister might have been.

Six months ago, Alberta left her husband at an intersection in Albuquerque. It was a cold Tuesday, they were on their way to Wal-Mart. They had eaten toaster pastries for breakfast and Clark still had some frosting in his beard. That's how Alberta describes it. He was driving and fiddling with the radio with his hairy hands. Light went red, traffic stopped. It was an old car, so the brakes squealed. Alberta looked down to find her hand already on the door handle. She hadn't even planned it.

She closed her eyes to memorize the way things felt in the car: the muffler rattling, heat blowing on her feet, something scrambling in her stomach. She got out.

Clark leaned over to watch her. His mouth hung open in a way that she had always disliked.

"Alberta, what the hell?"

She looked up the street, north toward Wal-Mart, then south the way they had come. It was a gray morning in both directions.

"What the hell are you doing?" Clark threw up his hands. "We're almost there."

The light turned green and the driver behind him honked, so Clark had to drive forward. He shouted her name and tried to pull over, but there was no shoulder. There was more honking, and Clark accelerated. Alberta took a deep breath of exhaust and waved to the rear window, where her son watched with a pale, sleepy face.

She borrowed a car and drove north, to Colorado, where she spotted me in line at the supermarket. We hadn't seen each other since

we were children, but she abandoned her cart and gave me a long and startling hug. She was so happy to see me she cried. My mother had been dead for two months and I was still dazed from the smell of the hospital and the paperwork, so it was nice to have somebody to talk to.

After she moved in, I lost my job at the Wapiti Lodge. It wasn't Alberta's fault—they were laying people off due to a decline in tourism. I guess this was to be expected since nobody understood why a tourist would come here in the first place. But come they did. I'd been washing somebody's dirty sheets.

That winter we played a lot of canasta. Fierce games. Some days I glared at Alberta until her face didn't make sense anymore, like real sisters. We started closing the curtains so we couldn't see the passage of time.

But day and night mean nothing to Alberta. She lives her life in spurts. Awake for three days, cooking, cleaning, always moving. Then three days of death. Nothing wakes her, not the phone, not the garbage disposal, not even a car accident on the highway that involved shouting and sirens. It's amazing.

Sometimes I find her in the bathroom, straining to see her teeth in the mirror. She has obsessed over them ever since I told her about the consequences of taking so much speed. She doesn't believe me. Her friends in Albuquerque have great smiles, she says, and their speed intake could set some kind of record. Either way, she tells me, it's fewer calories than beer.

"You'd rather be toothless than fat?" I ask.

"Yeah." She smiles weakly. "I mean, no offense."

But it's okay. I know I'm not a beauty queen. And I confess to having a few beers in the evenings—not so much that I get drunk, but enough to enjoy prime time TV and fall asleep when it's over.

We haven't been in the parking lot ten minutes when Alberta says: "One more stupid question and some motherfucker is dead."

We haven't even had a stupid question yet. Alberta's patience with the burrito business is wearing thin. It's the customers that get her. She glares at them through the windshield, little drooping groups of mill workers ignoring our carload of burritos and heading straight for the Conoco station, where they buy nachos with bright

cheese and complain of the injustice of having to eat nachos for lunch just because they work in the middle of nowhere.

"How much?"

He is our first customer of the day, a guy wearing a little bolo tie. He eyes the burritos in the back seat. He must be a manager of some kind—his look of disgust is polished.

Alberta points to the sign taped to the inside of the windshield and smiles in that adolescent way men find sexy. Mostly mean men, but men.

"Four dollars?" he asks. "What kind of burritos are they?"

"Breakfast burritos," Alberta says, beginning to unwrap one. "They're still warm."

The man chuckles. "Four dollars is little rich for something you're selling out of your car. What year is this thing?"

"Three fifty," Alberta says. "Special rate."

"Three fifty!" The man laughs so loud that Alberta is startled. She drops the half-opened burrito and gets its hot innards in her lap.

"What's that yellow stuff?" he asks.

"It's eggs," I tell him, and we both watch Alberta trying to clean herself off.

"What about that other stuff?"

"Cheese."

"Too bad," he sighs. "Can't have cheese. Do you have any without?"

Alberta shakes her head. The man eyes her breasts, which are small, but the cold air has made her nipples apparent.

"I'll tell you what," he says. "You girls make me a cheeseless burrito and I'll take one off your hands. If I like it, I might just come back. I work six days a week."

"It's a deal," I say. Alberta does the math on her fingers. Which is sad, not only because she's so bad at math, but because we really need the money.

My mother left me a small inheritance, but it's almost gone. I spent some of it on burrito ingredients, some of it on beer. The rest trickled away slowly. I'm sitting at the table, staring at my checkbook, thinking of all it represents, when Alberta comes in with a letter from Angola State Penitentiary in Louisiana. She quietly opens it. It's from her cousin Donny, her only remaining family member.

Excepting me, of course. He is the only person who knows where she is. I want to argue with Alberta for giving my address to a convicted felon, but she seems upset, and the felon is clearly captured. So I listen as she reads.

Dear Alberta,

I've been receiving letters from your husband Clark. He is looking for you and very sad. Says you've disappeared. He wanted me to tell you that he needs you at home. Things are okay here.

Donny.

Enclosed is a letter from Clark himself and the ink is smeared from what may have been tears. At the bottom there is a loopy blue signature that I would not have expected from a man. It reads, Clark Scarford.

Alberta's eyes fill up and she blinks at the pages. For the rest of the night she leans over a notepad at the kitchen table, writing to Donny about the decline of their marriage: Clark's impatience, his refusal to understand Spanish, the medical bills, his inability to get a job. She tells him of Clark's bungling of his own name at their wedding: *Clark Scart Fart*. That should have been her first indication.

She mails the letter in the morning, turning the little flag on the mailbox up. She fixates on the mailbox for a while, but eventually the letters stop because prison is no picnic and Donny doesn't have time to be the go-between. He sends Clark and Alberta a copy of the same letter, wishing them luck in their marriage and asking that nobody send him any more correspondence—not even for the holidays.

It's early one Friday and Alberta is standing in the kitchen in some sagging underwear.

"What are we going to do with all these burritos?" she asks.

Our sales are down. Lots of mill workers come to the car, but only to complain. They bitch about the heat and ask questions we can't answer. How does dust always manage to get past their protective glasses? Why are we selling breakfast burritos when it's well past noon? Do the ingredients start to go bad without refrigeration? One claims to have found a fingernail in his burrito. He wants some kind of compensation. Other times you can tell they're inventing ques-

tions out of boredom or loneliness or both. There are burritos on the countertops and on every shelf in the fridge.

Alberta suggests we give them to orphans.

"Great," I say. "Show me some orphans."

She says the orphanage is on Second Avenue and we've driven past it a million times. I always thought it was just a run-down house.

We park in front and immediately they start watching us. There are five of them outside, ranging in age and size, standing in a grassless yard. Their clothes are tattered, and an older girl pushes a smaller one on a creaking swing. The others peer at us through the fence. They look hungry and forlorn.

"You've got to be kidding."

And because it is warranted, I say it again.

Alberta says nothing. She just watches them through the windshield. She says she isn't feeling well, so I take the burritos inside. The employees, a mole-faced woman and a college-aged kid, are excited.

"What kind of burritos are they?" they ask.

I start to explain, but the woman has already torn into one and taken several bites. She nods to the boy, who grabs two and weighs them in his hands. He calls to the back and another employee emerges, an older woman who has not yet eaten lunch.

"I hope the orphans like them," I say.

The first woman nods. They are chewing, rolling back the aluminum foil, wiping their mouths with the backs of their hands.

"Great burritos," the kid says, mouth full. "What's in here, some kind of salsa?"

I don't answer. I tell myself they're testing the food before giving it to the orphans. Protecting them from weirdoes who might poison them, monsters who would target the helpless—the same people who extort the elderly over the phone and set cats on fire.

I want to take the burritos back, rip them from the hands of the employees and deliver them to the hungry children. But I'm not Jesus. Alberta and I aren't even philanthropists. We were just trying to unload a bunch of old burritos. And if a cat wandered onto the premises, lured by the smell of breakfast burritos, the orphans would probably torch it for a bit of entertainment.

In the car, Alberta is weeping. Her head is in her hands and mascara runs down her face in cruddy streaks. I put my hand on her back and decide not to tell her about the employees.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"I hate the way they look at me."

Nobody is looking. The orphans have lost interest in us. I tell her this, but it doesn't seem to help. When we get home, she sits in the bathtub and cries. Then she covers her puffy eyes with makeup, puts on high heels and a blouse she found in my mother's closet and totters out the door with a man whom I recognize as one of the mill workers. He's dusted off his jeans and combed his hair to one side, but he won't come into the porch light. He knocks twice and steps back into the shadows.

The following morning I'm watching *The Price is Right* when the doorbell rings. I haven't heard it in years, since before Mom died. It's a loud clanging and I spill coffee on my lap.

First, I see a long brown car pulling out of the driveway. Then I see this little dark-haired sprout, standing in front of the door looking down at his shoes. He wears an eye patch and as far as I can tell, he only has one arm. At the end of it, he has fingers curled around the black handle of a blue suitcase.

I crouch.

He still won't look up. From this angle, he looks exactly like Alberta.

"Are you Rusty?" I ask.

He starts to cry.

I look at the empty driveway. "Was that your daddy?"

He nods and the tears come faster. Alberta isn't home, so I stare at him, thinking of what to do next. Rusty stands quietly, his shoes on a handprint I put in the cement when it was wet and I was his age.

"Are you hungry?"

He says he is.

"Do you like burritos?"

He says he does and follows me into the kitchen.

He is asleep at the end of the couch. Alberta and I are drinking beer with our feet up on the coffee table, which is littered with the remains of Chinese takeout. After an afternoon of washing dried egg

out of every pan in the house, sizzling beef and broccoli seemed like just the thing.

I can tell by the way Alberta is tapping her foot that she's taken some pills. The whole coffee table is jiggling so that I have to hold my beer in my lap. We're trying to watch TV but somehow Rusty has messed up the rabbit ears so there's nothing on but an infomercial. An excited guy in a chef's hat tosses pineapples in the air and slices them in half. Alberta thinks this is hilarious, for a while. Then her face grows serious. She stares at the TV and bites her lip. She's had four or five of my beers.

"Do you want to know what happened to him?" she asks suddenly.

"Who?"

She nods at Rusty, leans forward to spear a cold piece of broccoli. There is brown sauce on her shirt, three drops of it, right over her heart.

"He was mauled," she says. "By dogs. Can you believe that shit?" She shakes her head and lets out a nervous, sputtering laugh. "Rottweilers. Like five of them. Who has that kind of luck?"

I look at Rusty lying there in one of Alberta's T-shirts. It's a dressing gown for a boy his size, and his knees are hidden inside it. He takes in deep sleeping breaths, lips apart. His mouth and fingertips are stained red—he's eaten nothing but jelly beans all day long. There are jelly beans on the coffee table, sorted by color into little piles, jelly beans crushed into the carpet.

"Rottweilers." Alberta shakes a cigarette from a pack on the coffee table and lights it. "I don't know why I remember that—I usually can't remember the name. Rottweilers. What is that, Russian? The neighbor had them living in her yard. Every summer the whole block smelled like baking dog shit."

She takes a long drag from her cigarette. "He was playing in the backyard," she says. "Then he wasn't."

Smoke seeps from between her lips and lingers around her face. I don't know what to say, so I don't say anything. Alberta fixes the chef on TV with a look of concern.

"The neighbor called the cops and then stood there, looking out the window. They're her dogs, right? But she's too scared to come outside and stop them from killing my fucking kid." She laughs, then rolls one of her pant legs up to where I can see a series of dark,

jagged scars. "Do you know what I did? I climbed over the fence and dragged him out of there myself. I took a rake from the side of the house and started swinging. I swung it so hard I fucked up my hands, but I just kept swinging, until I saw him lying there. He was so dirty I couldn't see his face. One of those assholes locked his jaws around my leg and I drug it all the way back to the street. I never even felt it."

She runs her fingers over the bluish scars. Then she looks out the window, at the yard, which is dark.

"Want to see something else?"

This time she rolls up her sleeve to show me a pale scar on her upper arm, a puncture wound from an ex-boyfriend's screwdriver.

The next day, I wake before Alberta. She's asleep with Rusty beside her and the house is quiet. So I declare a moratorium on burritos and drive into town in search of a job.

The sun is coming up and the streets in town are empty. McDonald's is the only place open, so I sip hot coffee and read the newspaper. There are openings at fast food restaurants and accounting firms, and they're looking for a new principal at the high school. And the Adobe Inn, where I worked for a few years after graduating, is hiring for housekeepers.

I abandon the want ads and watch the groggy faces of the men in the drive-through. They slump behind the wheels of company trucks and pay with wadded-up bills from their shirt pockets. It seems to me that's what Alberta and I need: men who get up before sunrise and leave the house without breakfast. Men with faces that are tired but content, with the right kind of wrinkles.

I glance at the warped reflection of my face in the steel napkin dispenser. It makes my forehead taller, my chin six inches wide. But I know what I look like. I'm wearing a T-shirt and yesterday's makeup, and the wrinkles spreading out from my eyes are the wrong kind. They should be crinkles from smiling, not squinting. People should wake up on feather pillows, with fresh faces, not the imprint of couch cushions or carpet or somebody's fist.

But who am I to think about where people sleep? I sleep in my mother's bed, the bed she made each morning for thirty-five years. I sleep between the sheets she folded down at night. I wake up where I was conceived. I'm twenty-nine years old, and I've gone exactly

nowhere. So I give up trying and circle the ad for the Adobe Inn. At least I'll get free donuts and orange juice.

I go to the pay phone outside, lift the receiver. I wonder what my mother would think if she could see me now, dizzy with a hangover, calling to inquire about the job she never wanted me to work. Coarse work for a white girl, she said. But she can't say anything now.

This strikes me like a revelation.

I guess I expected her to haunt me. But so far, she hasn't bothered. I don't hear her whispering through the house at night or see her face fleeting past the windows.

The dial tone is a long, sad note and I hang up the phone. I stare at the slowly warming asphalt. For years she spent every afternoon on a bench in the yard, waiting for me to visit. She ate ice cream bars and watched cars on the highway, seeming not to notice mosquitoes as they pierced her. She watched the ducks on her pond until they migrated forever, then she watched the plastic replacements I wedged into the pond bank. She said the same things over and over. She claimed to have spoken with her sister, long dead. It made me afraid to stop. I drove on, to the Casino or to work, to the apartment outside of town I used to rent. I glanced at the house, reached for the radio dial. An anonymous car going past.

I wake up to the sound of Rusty chasing rabbits. He is laughing, and the rabbits are fleeing and freezing, fleeing and freezing. Mother kept them as pets until there were too many, then she released them behind the house. Their numbers grew, and soon she forgot that the rabbits were her own doing and waged war on them. She shouted at them from the windows, tried to poison them. But with Mother dead and rabbits eating what remains of her garden, it looks like they are finally victorious.

Rusty chases them as though he'd know what to do if he caught one. He devises plans, mostly involving the allure of food and the reward of friendship. There is, of course, no place he can keep them. And the rabbits, if captured, would never forgive him. But a four-year-old will not believe it. He chases them through my mother's empty flowerbeds and under fences. He chases them with intention. He chases them with his one arm and his one eye and his full, pumping heart.

I find Alberta watching him from the window. She's pulled her knees up to her chest and put her arms around them. She is comfortable in an old chair and my hand-me-down bathrobe, and for a moment the house feels like theirs. The cement steps, the doors, the old shingles. For a moment, I feel like a ghost.

Since there is no one to watch him, we take Rusty to the mill to sell the last of our burritos. Something had to be done with all those cartons of eggs, so we made our best batch of burritos yet. Since we both knew it was our last attempt, we put a little bit extra of everything.

We unroll one and eat it while we wait for the employees to get their morning break. Rusty watches the door intently. He doesn't know what a mill worker is, but the mention of them has made his eye grow wide. I don't know what he's expecting. But after a while, he crawls into the backseat and settles down into the fading warmth of the burritos. When the customers approach, he's sound asleep.

"What kind of sandwiches?"

The Navajos persist in calling them sandwiches.

Alberta describes the ingredients. Eggs, cheese, potatoes, ham. The burritos marked with a black X have salsa, the others do not.

They nod. If the ingredients entice them at all, they show no sign of it. They gather around the station wagon, looking inside, speaking to each other in low Navajo syllables, examining the burritos and the boy sleeping in them. One bends down to inspect the air-pressure in the front tire. Then he stands and asks in a muffled accent, "Is that your boy?"

"Yes, of course," she says.

"Are you an Indian?"

"No, I'm not."

The man thinks about this. "I'm looking for my daughter."

Alberta says nothing.

"When I find her—" He makes a fist. Then he asks for a ride to wherever we're going and indicates the backseat with his chin.

Alberta shakes her head.

The man looks at the sleeping child and the little aluminum logs.

"You should wake that boy up," he says. "He's smashing those sandwiches."

I look in the rear view mirror at Rusty. His eyes flutter like he's dreaming. Maybe he dreams of black fur, and in his sleep his body remembers what his mind will not: the taste of dirt and fur in his mouth, the heat of blood in his eyes and the sound that came from their throats, like the flushing of rusted toilets.

I start work at the Adobe Inn the following Monday. The same manager is there, but she's aged. Her face has fallen like a cake. She doesn't remember firing me and seems not to recognize me at all. She puts me through an entire day of training, even though I know what I'm doing, even though I remember the policy on theft and I fold back the comforters just the way she likes them.

It's not a bad job. Sometimes I get tips, or find things, like cosmetics and half-finished crossword puzzles. In the afternoons I lock myself in one of the smoking rooms and watch my old soap opera, which is creepy because the characters are the same after all these years. Even the ones that died have come back, only to find themselves facing the same old enemies, wearing the same old sequined dress.

In the meantime, Alberta is so hopped up that I think I hear her bones buzzing.

"You have to stop this," I say. "Think about Rusty."

But it does no good. She must have pills hidden all over the house. She takes them in place of sleep and food. For nights she has been gone with a man she met at the Conoco station, and she comes to the motel, looking for Rusty. He's sitting on one of the beds, watching me clean. Alberta is diminished. The blades of her shoulders seem to protrude from her tank top. When she picks Rusty up, I'm afraid her arms will snap at the elbows. But they don't, and he looks relieved to be in her lap.

"Alberta," I plead. "Just take a break, for a little while."

She is up, dragging a chair across the floor, climbing onto it, straining to reach the curtain rod.

"What are you doing?"

"Helping," she says.

"We don't do the curtains. We just change the bedding and vacuum."

She ignores me, but her hands are shaking too bad to maneuver the hooks. She struggles with them for a while, and her hands fall to her sides.

"Fine," she says. "What can I do?"

"Nothing," I tell her. "This is my job."

She closes her eyes. I can tell she's hurt, but I don't know what to say. So I put a new liner in the trashcan, replace the toilet paper roll. Alberta stands there for a while, then climbs down and joins Rusty on the bed. Together they find a channel with cartoons.

It's like this for a week or two. Alberta comes to work with me and watches TV in one of the rooms while I clean the others. When the manager isn't around she takes Rusty to the pool. Other times, she follows me, trying to help. I show her the laundry chute and how to arrange the shampoos and washrags, tell her which size of towel goes where. I suggest she fill out an application, and she says she will. But she never goes near the office. She slinks past it when we arrive in the mornings, and almost has a heart attack when the manager mistakes her for a guest and says hello.

He is looking at me when I wake up. I've overslept and he needs help with his shoelaces. He sits in a chair by my bed with his feet dangling.

Alberta is gone. I recognize the abandoned look on Rusty's face.

She's taken most of her stuff, but forgotten her toothbrush. There was a hasty attempt to make the bed, her version of an apology, something she would not have done if she intended to come back. Used tissues are piled under the bedside lamp and my mother's blouse is folded over the back of a chair.

I sit down in the kitchen and Rusty sits across from me. I think about Alberta. Without her, the house is still. Dust is settling; I can see it in the streams of light that come in the windows. I think about how quiet it must have been when my mother lived here during her final, solitary years.

We decide on waffles and noise for breakfast, because neither of us wants anything to do with eggs. He helps me, standing underfoot, asking questions. He wants to know the origin of syrup and the meaning of the word pirate. I tell him that a pirate is a crazy, hijacking sea-robber. Twice he tries to hold my hand.